

## Michael Gray's Arts Blog

THE PRODUCERS

Witham Amateur Operatic Society

31.10.2015

A "new Mel Brooks musical". Well, not so new, now. It's nearly 15 years since Bloom and Bialystock hit Broadway running. But it certainly has the hilarious hand of Brooks all over it, adapted of course from his cult film of 1968, though a little lighter in tone, more upbeat, and of course crammed with loads of extra songs.

In this fine production for WAOS, Amy Trigg sets the relentless slapstick action against a black set, cleverly focussing our attention on the actors and the colourful costumes.

The unlikely pairing of mild-mannered accountant and hard-bitten impresario is the core of the comedy. And Witham field a superb double act, in the glorious tradition of musical theatre. Michael Watling is the callow Leo, hysterically clutching his blue blanket and dreaming his fantasy world of showbiz. Max, the cynical hack who's lost the Midas touch and now turns to little old ladies for kicks and cash to bankroll his shows, is in the capable hands of David Slater, selling some pretty so-so numbers and enthusiastically painting this larger-than-life portrait of a desperate producer.

They're surrounded by an OTT collection of eccentrics and oddballs, including Corrina Wilson's buxom Ulla, David Everest-Ring's delicious De Bris with his Chrysler Building gown and his "common-law assistant" Carmen [Lewis Behan], who gets to join the brown-shirt kickline in Act Two. Stuart Scott Brown makes the most of the Nazi nutter Liebkind; a very strong comedy performance, excellent vocally, too. Amongst the grannies and the camp followers, honourable mentions for Rhianna Howard's "Hold Me Touch Me", Tim Clarke's Stormtrooper, Dexter Montgomery's promising Sabu [without his elephant] and Constance Lawton and Emma Loring as the Usherettes who kick off the whole show at the première of Funny Boy, Bialystock's take on Hamlet.

Some great ensemble work, with choreography by Louise La Chance: the Zimmer routine amongst many others. "That Face", for Leo and Ulla, is a perfect pastiche of the glory days of the romantic musical.

Like Max's dire musicals, the show is, if not "guaranteed to offend", then at least coarse, tasteless and unsubtle. Jews, Irish, gays and geriatrics all on the sharp end of the satire. Some of the numbers seem like padding, even the brilliantly done recap soliloquy for Max. But the central concept is still strong, and the energetic company at Witham extract every ounce of outrageous comedy from it. Lots of delicious detail [De Bris' doorbell] and slick staging – the scene changes laudably smooth and swift.

In the pit, the nostalgic sound of a big, brassy band – Thomas Duchan is the MD.

Next up from WAOS, not, alas, the Bialystock/Bloom Rabbis of Penzance, but the almost as improbable Australian version of the G&S Pirates – not one for Savoy purists, I would guess.